

## Communism Never Happened: Serban Savu and the Cluj Connection

by David Cohen

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Cristi Pogacean, *Modernist bird house*, 2005-2007,  
wood, 17 cm. Courtesy of Galeria Plan B, Berlin.

On the occasion of Serban Savu's exhibition of new paintings at David Nolan Gallery, and in recognition of the show earlier this year of Ciprian Muresan at the same gallery, DAVID COHEN offers an extract from his essay in the recently published monograph on Savu.

"One word says everything about the people from whom I come and to whom I remain faithful because I find in myself all their defects: *minor*. It is not an "inferior" people, it is a people for whom everything turns out small scale, in miniature (not to say caricature), even misfortune." E.M.Cioran

As if a riposte to Cioran's talk of "smallness," the Romania of Serban Savu's childhood, and the present-day Romania he describes, was and is the victim of colossal hubris. He was eleven years old when, in the revolution of 1989—less than velvet compared with other East European countries—Nicolae Ceausescu was deposed and executed, ending his quarter century dictatorship

and four decades of communist rule. The sufferings to which Ceaușescu subjected his country were anything but diminutive. An obsession with driving down national debt and a determination to destroy peasant culture led to years of economic stultification, the physical eradication of half the country's 13,000 villages, the demolition of swathes of historic city fabric and the permanent scarring of the land with mindless and humungous structures, whether the utterly absurd House of the People, in Bucharest (at three times the size of Versailles, it was, in the words of Tony Judt, "a monstrous lapidary metaphor for unconstrained tyranny") or conglomerations of mass housing, the "agro-towns" to which dispossessed peasants were sent, incongruously placed in the middle of nowhere.

In response to false grandeur, Savu often paints buildings and industrial structures that are imposing and drab. The eponymous edifice in *The Gray 10-floor Block* (2008) leaves no room for the sky above it, nor do the abutting blocks in the corner of *Unveiling the New Furniture* (2010). Savu's attitude towards communism's ubiquitous housing projects is ambivalent. His paintings often acknowledge the stoic dignity of its drab modernism. His brush finds hidden beauty in decaying concrete comparable to that discovered by the 18th-century Welsh painter Thomas Jones in the back streets of Naples. The arrangement of browns and grays in the cropped segment of façade in *Parking Sunday* (2008) has a quiet poetry akin to a still life by Giorgio Morandi. But beyond aestheticism, his accommodations of brutalist buildings into soft, lyrical landscapes, such as *Ludus* (2009) for instance, seems to carry a spiritual argument with its non-judgmental juxtaposition of an old village and an agro-town. This sweet and sour image is rich in possible meanings, but at various levels, it is cathartic, a consoling message to his countrymen. It seems to say that nature can heal wounds, that the disruptive and also potently symbolic dichotomy of these two settlements on different sides of the river and all they represent about futures and pasts can nonetheless blend in some kind of post-historical picturesque.

There are two striking, seemingly contradictory features in the half-decade span of Savu's short career: an unmistakable Savu look, and significant diversity. Mood and purpose are consistent, but touch varies almost from canvas to canvas, determined by pictorial content and scale of each image rather than some stylistic progression. He works from photographs, some found in the media and others taken himself, which he assembles into working sources in Photoshop. His locales are all actual places he knows and studies. In some paintings there is a tough tightness to the realism, whether of the figures or buildings; in others there is painterly relish, as if within the last five years there are distinctions of touch as marked in Savu as in the extended career of the German 19th-century realist Adolph Menzel, who veered from early impressionism to a finessed classicism. Savu's smaller canvases, which often focus on a single figure and a singular observation, are often his most winning.

The more ambitious works, the multi-figure group compositions, are more forcibly touched with an element of incongruity yet they too hold back from full-blown absurdity, or even Surrealism. The Ceausescu regime was so "surreal" in some of its manifestations – the surveillance techniques of the Securitate, the publishing of Ileana Ceausescu's pseudo-science, the cult of leadership that dubbed Ceausescu "the Genius of the Carpathians, the Danube of Thought" – that Surrealism presents itself as an option to writers like Nobel laureate Herta Müller who, in one of her novels, has an apple tree that grows a mouth with which to devour its own fruit. Even at his most outlandish, Savu is closer to the incipient oddity of Giorgio de Chirico, say, than the overt weirdness of Salvador Dalí or the punning illogic of René Magritte. Indeed, it is the degree of credibility in the scenes he depicts, and the slow unfolding of futility or misguidedness, that lends his scenes their charge. He comes close to a symbolic uncanny (akin to the moral of folly in the inverse building construction of Brueghel's *Tower of Babel* [1569]) in his painting *The Old Roof* (2009) in which four boys play soccer on the roof of a building whose center is dominated by a perilous two-storey courtyard. There is still the possibility of a rational, prosaic explanation as to what is going on, however, that the boys are engaged in a dare-devil game in which the chasm of a courtyard adds gladiatorial risk to proceedings.

While Surrealism is a valid option for Müller in stories directly confronting the horrors of the Ceausescu regime and the consequences of offering it resistance, to Savu and his close-knit circle

of peers who were at art school together in Cluj, and whose study and launch of career take place post-1989, something more subtle and diffident is called for to describe the numbed state of reconstruction, of discovering normality amidst the ruins of a failed regime, and of coming to terms with the past as children of its last years, and of parents who had simply to keep their heads down and survive. They are a generation that seems skeptical of big gestures and grand narratives. It is telling that many of them have exhibited with the Cluj gallery Plan B whose very name betokens a bemused sense of what to do next. Savu's close associate, Ciprian Muresan, works in a variety of conceptual and traditional modes but consistently in ways that send up the hubris of systems and situations with a gentle, comic understatement: exquisite pastiches of socialist realist drawings of (glue sniffing) young pioneers blowing into plastic bags; young school children reading Ionesco's *The Rhinoceros*; a wall text, using vinyl cut from old LPs, that says, in English, "Communism Never Happened." Muresan's gentle provocations seem intended to place him out of the market of big gestures. There is, likewise, a wry and diminutive sensibility at play in **Cristi Pogacean's** sculpture, *Modernist Bird House 2005-07*, where the rationalist, functionalist architectural style adopted by the Party in mass housing units takes on markedly different attributes in this dainty, effete folly. Savu's delicious painterly touch is too assured to equate with the dazed and confused state of mind of the characters and situations he depicts, and yet there are elements in his style – his quietude, understatement, eclecticism, lack of flashiness – that relate to the shellshock mood of the post-1989 generation.

Though he attended the prestigious art school in Cluj, Savu is largely self-taught in his realism. There is a common misconception about contemporary Eastern European artists that somehow, like Russian or Chinese artists, they must automatically be steeped in the language and techniques of academic socialist realism as if these are residual skills still enforced in art schools. Savu's professor at Cluj in the 1990s was the neo-romantic painter Ioan Sbarciu, a colleague of the German neo-expressionist Markus Lüpertz and now a senator in Romania's parliament, who would certainly have had no reason to enforce redundant styles. Savu's older colleague, Victor Man, took himself to Jerusalem to study at the small, independent atelier of expatriate American painter Israel Hershberg, the Jerusalem Studio School, to learn the old master techniques he craved. Savu found his technique from close study of renaissance painting during an extended residency in Venice in 2002-04 (as recipient of the Nicolae Lorga postgraduate research grant) and this perhaps accounts for the relative primitivism in his handling of form, which is anti-academic. In Cluj, while still a student, Man had sought out the underground painter Cornel Brudascu, an artist who had been persecuted by the regime for his sexual orientation and painted in eclectic styles. Excelling as a flower painter, Brudascu became a personal hero to Man, Savu and a third young painter, Adrian Ghenie simply for his determination to do his own thing. Savu's painterly language, therefore, should not be read as an ironic riff on socialist realism in the way that makes conceptual sense in relation to the German Neo Rauch, who studied at Leipzig in the 1980s and makes skillful use of appropriated, anachronistic painting modes.

This argument does not preclude symbolic significance in elements of Savu's style. There is almost a willful dullness in his invariably subdued palette and a certain chalkiness in the texture of his paint that matches his pervasive melancholy. That concrete is so prevalent a motif lends an odd associative feeling that somehow dust has rubbed off the buildings into the very pigment. His dry, slow, carefully modulated paint application contrasts with the oily flourishes favored by Man (in earlier works) and Ghenie. Savu's literal lack of slickness accords with the temper of his paintings. Introducing art theory to the distinction between scale and size, Alberti exhorts the reader of his treatise on painting with the words: "*Istoria* gives greater renown to the intellect than any colossus." Savu's paintings are a profound record of a society in recovery from colossal errors of governance. Recently, he has embarked on what are for him large paintings, but most typically, he is happy with a modest scale, and as has been suggested, a modest touch, pace and emotional distance. He works in an idiom that is in two distinct senses "out" of history: it is historically derived (though without constituting a quotation or pastiche a particular moment) and it is out of step with current expectations. In much the way that American artists Elizabeth Peyton, Paul R. or Duncan Hannah adopt an illustrative, knowingly slight language that matches their penchant for nostalgia and infatuation, and within whose limiting confines there is nonetheless space for expressive growth, so Savu adopts a plainspoken style that risks blandness for the sake of empathy with his subject, and

as an antidote to the bombastic imposition of grand schemes. This suggests, in contrast with his meteoric career successes as an artist collected avidly around the world, a kind of elective minority, a willingness to occupy a small corner of painting. Savu has found a niche where he can observe a future for his countrymen and work one out for his art.